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ABSTRACT

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An Analysis of Sex Role  
Stereotyping in Daytime Television Serials

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An analysis of sex role stereotyping in daytime television serials.

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The verbal behavior of the characters of three daytime serials was analyzed over a period of two weeks of continual viewing and coded into nineteen previously developed categories. It was found that despite the recent introduction of new and controversial subject matter into the plot lines of these programs, male and female characters were responding in essentially traditional and stereotypic patterns. A difference was, however, noted between the content of the specific programs studied, with two being more conservative than the third. The authors conclude that soap operas, a popular and potentially strong socializing influence on their audience, still present rather limited role models.

## An analysis of sex role stereotyping in daytime television serials

If women are to be prepared to choose among a variety of life styles, some of which differ from the traditional pattern of marriage, procreation, child rearing and performance of household tasks, they must be exposed to models representing the full range of potential possibilities. A woman's upbringing and parental role models provide a narrow, often limited range of alternatives. It is mass media that influences and at times controls all other opportunities to present role models. Yet the models the media present of women are the very stereotypic ones of the past - "according to [the stereotype] the majority of women, or rather the abstract Woman, is the homemaker, interested chiefly in domestic affairs: she is fond of babies and devoted to her children's success..." (Klein, 1975, p. 26). This image of women exists in many forms of mass communication. Key (1975) finds that children's books "do their part in preparing girls to accept unquestioningly their future as unimportant, nonproductive, nonadventurous, and unintelligent beings" (p. 66). Saario (1973) found that elementary school textbooks are no less guilty of stereotyping sex-roles. Franzwa (1975) discovered very traditional stereotypes and story lines in the fiction of leading women's magazines. We were primarily concerned with the images of men and women projected on television. Specifically, what is the sphere of roles observable on the daytime serials of television? A. C. Nielsen Company reports that 71% of the soap audience is composed of women over eighteen years of age, with men (14%) and children making up the remainder (Note 1). Are these 6 million women viewing actresses who are portrayed consistently different from the actors? How powerful is the influence of

these shows?

Television, although still a relatively new medium, has come to totally dominate all other forms of communication as the primary source of news and entertainment. Its power extends to the point where it has become a vital part of most peoples' life-styles. When participants in an experiment conducted three years ago were asked to stop viewing for a year, none of them could resist for more than five months, and all experienced strong psychological withdrawal symptoms ("Life without," 1972). Television encourages segregation from others; it is watched in solitude, bringing in a supply of information, knowledge, stories, and romance without requiring anyone ever to set foot outside the door (Boorstin, 1971). Whatever one chooses to watch on television can become one's primary reality and thus the selection of material presented is crucial. "Every time you present something on television you imply an attitude, you insinuate a set of values; it's the most effective propaganda machine in the world" (Gutcheon, 1974, p. 81).

Thus, the medium itself is powerful and the content influential. Soap operas exert a unique influence. One need only observe an average afternoon in the television room in the Student Union Building at Brooklyn College to see how "All My Children" controls the emotions of the assembled mass. On one particular day one hundred and fourteen people watched intently, gave advice and comments, and often applauded the verbal displays of the various characters. In fact, the audience seemed to wish it could control the lives and actions of the characters. Anthony Astrachan claims the mysterious fascination of soaps results from "the desire to get involved with the lives and emotions of people close to their own age and outlook - without having

responsibility for them" (Astrachan, 1975, p. 62). These characters have tremendous potential power. As Katsman (1972) noted, "they can establish or reinforce value systems. They can suggest how people should act in certain situations. They can legitimize behavior..." (p. 212). This adds to the dominating, and possibly domineering, nature of the soaps. Yet audience involvement results not only from the characters, but from the medium itself. Marshall McLuhan (1964) believes that television is a medium of low definition, or intensity, and thus demands more participation than other forms of media. The technological methods of transmitting the television picture require a viewer to construct a visual "wholeness" from a series of dots. "Because the low definition of TV insures a high degree of audience involvement, the most effective programs are those that present situations which consist of some process to be completed" (McLuhan, p. 278). Soap operas fall into this category; there is always a mystery or secret in the story line which demands an answer. Thus, the medium itself, the design of the program, and the characters portrayed all combine to magnify the power of the soap opera. Such a wealth of control over audiences warrants an investigation of how that power is being utilized.

This study focused on the personalities exhibited on the soaps, using an empirically derived quantitative coding procedure. The intention is to observe how the roles of men and women are depicted in an era in which some members of society are making an effort to achieve egalitarian treatment of the sexes. Are the writers of soap operas still creating characters who are uni-dimensional - thoroughly bad or paragons of self-sacrifice - who exemplify a single quality (grasping, generous, domineering) as the author

of a book for serial writing once preached (Field, 1958)? Of fundamental concern is whether women are still portrayed in old-fashioned roles, with stereotypic traits. Many recent articles on soap operas suggest that there has been a change, called "progress," on the shows. "In recent years soap operas have been taking a new look at their audience...and updating their material to suit the changing times" (Pierce, 1973, p. 39). Yes, the soaps are gradually more willing to touch such "real social issues" as drugs, venereal disease, and the Viet Nam war (Astrachan, 1975). Yet expanding the subject matter does not in itself constitute progress. It may, and probably is, actually blinding us to what is really relevant information; just how the men and women act and respond to the issues they have before them. In essence, do television serials allow women a certain freedom by portraying role-models of liberated women, or are the soaps still portraying only traditional life-styles for women?

#### Method

Three serials were chosen randomly, one on each network, each a half hour program. All three shows - "The Guiding Light," "The Doctors," and "General Hospital" - were watched for a period of eight weeks on a once-a-week basis to learn story lines and characters, followed by two final weeks of daily viewing for coding the data.

#### Procedure

On each viewing day every scene consisting of more than four verbal remarks was coded. A remark was defined as an uninterrupted verbal expression of one complete thought (Bales, 1970).

Categories were empirically developed to standardize the viewing: each

remark a character made was placed in one of the 19 categories. The categories employed are presented below.

- (1) Nurturant (praising, serving)
- (2) Aggressive (overtly expressive in negative manner)
- (3) Agreeing
- (4) Disagreeing
- (5) Asking for Information
- (6) Giving Information
- (7) Avoidance (refuse answering, evasive)
- (8) Directive (initiating; directing)
- (9) Problem-solving (offering solutions, hypothesizing)
- (10) Helpful
- (11) Expression of Emotion (crying)
- (12) Expression of Hops (for oneself, or another)
- (13) Expression of Hopelessness (for oneself, or another)
- (14) Assertive (persuasive, forceful)
- (15) Dejected (discontentment)
- (16) Happy
- (17) Statement about self (positive, negative, neutral)
- (18) Statement about other (positive, negative, neutral)
- (19) Deference (submitting to others' opinion)

Three raters employed this procedure. Interrater reliability was high ( $r = .9$ ).

The location of each scene, the topic of conversation, the characters involved, and the kinds of remarks made by each of them was noted (See,

Appendix A).

### Results and Discussion

The frequency of each category of remarks made by the male and female characters in soap operas studied is shown in Table 1. The analysis revealed

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Insert Table 1  
- - - - -

that the behavior patterns depicted on these programs are modeled on a rather traditional view of the roles of men and women. Female characters were significantly more nurturant ( $\chi^2 = 5.33$ ,  $p < .025$ ), displayed more avoidant behavior ( $\chi^2 = 2.82$ ,  $p < .10$ ) and expressed hopelessness ( $\chi^2 = 7.76$ ,  $p < .01$ ) more often than did male characters. Men appeared more directive than women ( $\chi^2 = 6.13$ ,  $p < .025$ ). Since the findings are based on the assumption that, within each category, the frequencies should differ little from each other, the implication is that these consistent deviations reflect a conscious or unconscious subscription to the stereotypic portrayal of the sexes.

Although no other differences that were found reached the accepted levels of statistical significance, seven of the nine remaining categories followed trends toward evidence of stereotypic behavior. Women exhibited a greater number of "emotional," "dejected" and "deferent" reactions than did men, whereas more "aggressive" and "problem-solving" remarks were made by men than women. However, more "helping" remarks were made by males than by females and females made more "assertive" statements than did males.

The verbal behavior of the various characters differ notably from program to program. The characters on "The Guiding Light" tend to be more traditional than those on "General Hospital." "The Doctors" was the most progressive of the three programs. In fact, in this show some of the role traits were reversed - women's comments were more directive than men's.

The average number of times male and female characters spoke was also assessed (See Table 2). Both the men and women spoke approximately the same

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Insert Table 2  
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amount on "The Guiding Light" and "The Doctors." However, the women on "General Hospital" spoke more often in proportion to their number of appearances on the program than the men did. The qualitative analysis in combination with this data supports an image projected of the stereotypic "talkative" female.

The locations where each conversation took place for same sex or between sex interactions (male-male, female-female, or male-female) are listed in Table 3. Here again one may observe traditional role patterns, with women

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Insert Table 3  
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appearing more often in home settings and men in office situations. It is interesting to note that when the conversation involved a male-female interaction, the setting was usually the home. This finding is particularly enlightening in view of the fact that all three serials employ hospitals as

major locations and have a number of leading characters who are nurses and doctors by profession and would thus be expected to spend more time in the employment situation. The two main female leads in "The Doctors" run the clinic in the hospital while the main male characters are administrators, surgeons, and the like. The women who were professionals were given roles of a basically nurturant sort.

The results of the data presented indicate that although soap operas may be introducing new and controversial subject matter, the characters are still responding in rather stereotypic and traditional ways. Essentially, it is the women who are depicted as hopeless and displaying avoidance behavior, whereas the men were shown as directive and problem solving.

The question must be raised in relation to daytime serials as it has been with children's books and magazine articles about the extent to which it is the function or responsibility of fiction writers to change attitudes or merely to entertain (and thereby sell products) without regard to social content. The main goal of commercial television programming is to sell the sponsor's product. Obviously, the soap sponsor can sell more "soap" to women who are at home, and not out working, but societal growth dictates that other, more progressive portrayals than the ones observed be presented on the daytime serials.

As to whether or not soap operas can change attitudes and norms, no concrete evidence is available to answer such a question. Logic will tell us that those same characters who hold audiences captive for any length of time are indeed capable of suggesting modes of action or behavior. Astrachan (1975) cites the opinion of Henry F. Schwarz III, an anthropologist - "soap

operas may fulfill the same functions for Americans that folk tales do for other peoples - providing models of problem-solving and behavioral norms" (p. 64). Such models however, have ethical and social implications. If the media does possess the degree of social responsibility it professes to hold, then new approaches to the issues as well as new issues need to be introduced.

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Table 1

**Types of Verbal Remarks made by  
the Men and Women on all Three Shows Given in  
Frequencies and in Percentages of Total Behaviors of Each Sex**

Type of Remark	Frequencies and Percentages	
	Women (n=21)	Men (n=22)
Nurturant	20*	7
	3.72	1.49
Aggressive	12	14
	2.23	2.99
Agreeing <sup>a</sup>	23	21
	4.28	4.48
Disagreeing	38	18
	7.08	3.84
Gives Information	81	75
	15.08	15.99
Asks for Information	85	93
	15.83	19.83
Avoidance	37***	23
	6.89	4.9
Directive	28*	51
	5.21	10.87
Problem-solving	43	52
	8.01	11.09
Helpful	11	17
	2.05	3.62
Expression of Emotion	8	-
	1.49	-
Expression of Hope	26	23
	4.84	4.9
Expression of Hopelessness	25**	8
	4.66	1.71
Assertive	29	20
	5.4	4.26
Dejected	22	12
	4.1	2.56
Happy	7	6
	1.3	1.28
Deference	6	2
	1.12	.43
TOTALS: Frequency	<u>537</u>	<u>469</u>
Percentage	93.29	94.24

Note. The percentages do not add up to 100% as two categories were omitted because they occurred infrequently.

\*The Chi-square test was not performed on the categories agreeing, disagreeing, gives, and asks for information because these behaviors are not helpful in forming a character-type on a soap opera. All characters display much of these types of behavior, due to the nature of the continuing story line of a serial.

\*p .025

\*\*p .01

\*\*\*p .10

Table 2

**Mean Number of Remarks of Men and Women in a Scene/All Shows**

Show	Women	Men
Guiding Light	8.83 <sup>a</sup> n=7	8.84 n=7
Doctors	7.15 n=5	8.2 n=9
General Hospital	7.21 n=9	3.43 n=6

<sup>a</sup>This number is derived from the division of total remarks, by the number of appearances.

Table 3

**Analysis of Same and Cross Sex Interactions (dyads only)**  
**by Location - Given in Percentages**

Type of Dyad	Home	Office
Male-Male n=8	12.5	75
Female-Female n=12	50	17
Female-Male n=36	47	25

Note. The percentages do not add up to 100% because some scenes did not take place in either the home or office setting. Phone calls and hospital rooms are examples of such cases.

## Appendix A

The following is a sample of a data sheet for one scene on "The Guiding Light."

## Scene #1

Location:	Topic:
Home	She's scared about Ken
Holly	Ed
5 (asks info)	6 (gives info)
13 (expresses hopelessness)	6 (gives info)
11 (cries)	
14 (assertive)	9 (problem-solving)
13 (expresses hopelessness)	1 (nurturant)
15 (dejected)	9 (problem-solving)
8 (directive)	6 (asks info)
9 (problem-solving)	5 (gives info)
7 (avoidance)	18+ (statement about other positive)
7 (avoidance)	10 (helpful), 1 (nurturant)